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New Water Wars? Hold Your Fire . . .

A THREE-YEAR truce in California's water wars is now in serious peril.

A shaky peace between urban water users, environmental groups and agriculture could be seriously tested by yesterday's release of a draft environmental impact statement on the options for revamping the plumbing of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

*There may be
cheaper
and better
options to
building
the Junior
Peripheral
Canal*

The most divisive issue will be a proposal to build a 44-mile canal around the delta's eastern flank to divert Sacramento River water to pumping stations near Tracy.

Is this a resurrection of the Peripheral Canal — a budget-busting and habitat-wrecking boondoggle

that state voters thought they put to permanent rest in a 1982 ballot initiative? Not quite. This new plan would carry about half the volume of the 1980s proposal, and would be equipped with screens to keep navigating fish from being drawn into pumps. Advocates of the proposed smaller-scale canal — the so-called "isolated facility" — maintain that its primary goal is to improve water quality rather than to ship greater quantities south.

This plan should not be dismissed out of

hand, but it needs to be greeted with some hard questions between now and the June close of public comment. Among them:

■ Is the \$1 billion canal price tag realistic, and who would pay it?

■ How much water could be saved or diverted through other means, including conservation, reuse of waste water and creating a more market-oriented system of water transfers?

■ How far can the two more moderate proposals in the EIS — possibly involving new barriers to protect fish, wider channels or a short canal — go toward accomplishing water-quality goals?

The decision on which course to take is expected to be made this summer by CalFed, a team representing seven federal and state agencies. Its EIS was neutral on which option would be best. But it does not take much reading between the lines to know that agriculture and urban water districts will be pushing for the Junior Peripheral Canal, and the findings in this document only advances their effort.

These struggles over water quality and quantity need to continue to be settled through bargaining and cooperation, rather than through litigation or political force, so all sides need to hold their fire while this EIS gets a full airing.

And that discussion should be focused on looking for alternatives to an enormous public works project as the solution to a healthy delta and reliable high-quality water supply.